

# SIX STEPS TO CHANGING YOUR COMPANY'S SAFETY CULTURE

(Through the Story of a Man  
Who's Been There)



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# INTRODUCTION

Few things are harder than changing a company's culture. Years of engrained beliefs and behaviours can make it seem impossible especially when you're dealing with employees who have been at their jobs for a long time and have seen management mandates come and go. BNSF Railway is one such company. One of the world's largest freight railways, BNSF has over

**40,000 employees**  
**operating 32,000 miles of track in North America.**  
**The work is 24 hours a day,**  
**365 days a year.**

It's not exactly the recipe for easy change.

However, BNSF did it. Here the former head of operations at the railway, Greg Fox, explains how and what you can learn from the process to install a change of safety culture in your own business.





“Any loss of life  
is unacceptable”

## 1. YOU MUST ACCEPT THAT THE STATUS QUO IS UNACCEPTABLE

“About a decade ago, we were focused on behaviour-based safety,” Fox says. “We were making progress in terms of just reducing the number of reportable incidents. But we were still unfortunately – tragically – still experiencing loss of life and serious life-altering injuries and it just wasn’t acceptable. That was the trigger moment. Any loss of life is unacceptable.”

So, Greg Fox says, BNSF looked outside to change itself inside.

“We went to work then on working with BST at that time, now DEKRA, to really understand how to change the culture,” he says. “It wasn’t just about process safety. It was also the leadership and the safety culture in which those processes were executed that ultimately proved to be the secret sauce, if you will.”



“You’re talking about people, changing perspectives, mindsets, experiences. It takes a long time.”

## 2. BE PATIENT (TRUE CHANGE TAKES TIME)

Like all great leaders, Fox was anxious to improve things and do it quickly. However, he says, changing a culture is something that takes time.

“It takes a lot of patience,” Fox says, “incredible patience, to change the culture because you’re dealing with people and, in many cases, people who’ve been around for, you know, 30 years in the industry and they’ve seen safety programs come and go.”

“It takes three years to change a climate,” he continues, “six, seven years to change a culture and I believe that in my heart. In this case you’re talking about people, changing perspectives, mindsets, experiences. It takes a long time.”





“Following the rules are the difference-makers for someone going home to their family at the end of the work day.”

### 3. START WITH RULE COMPLIANCE

After DEKRA helped BNSF identify its culture pressure points, one of the first places the railway looked to install their safety change was in rule compliance.

“And what we found is we weren’t consistent in how our employees were following the rules and, frankly, how we were assessing exceptions to the rules in terms of discipline,” Fox continued. “So we focused on a set of critical skills – life-altering, critical skills and rules – and we held people accountable. And then we challenged ourselves around procedural justice insuring that we were treating people equally.”

“In many cases,” he says, “following the rules are the difference-makers for someone going home to their family at the end of the work day.”



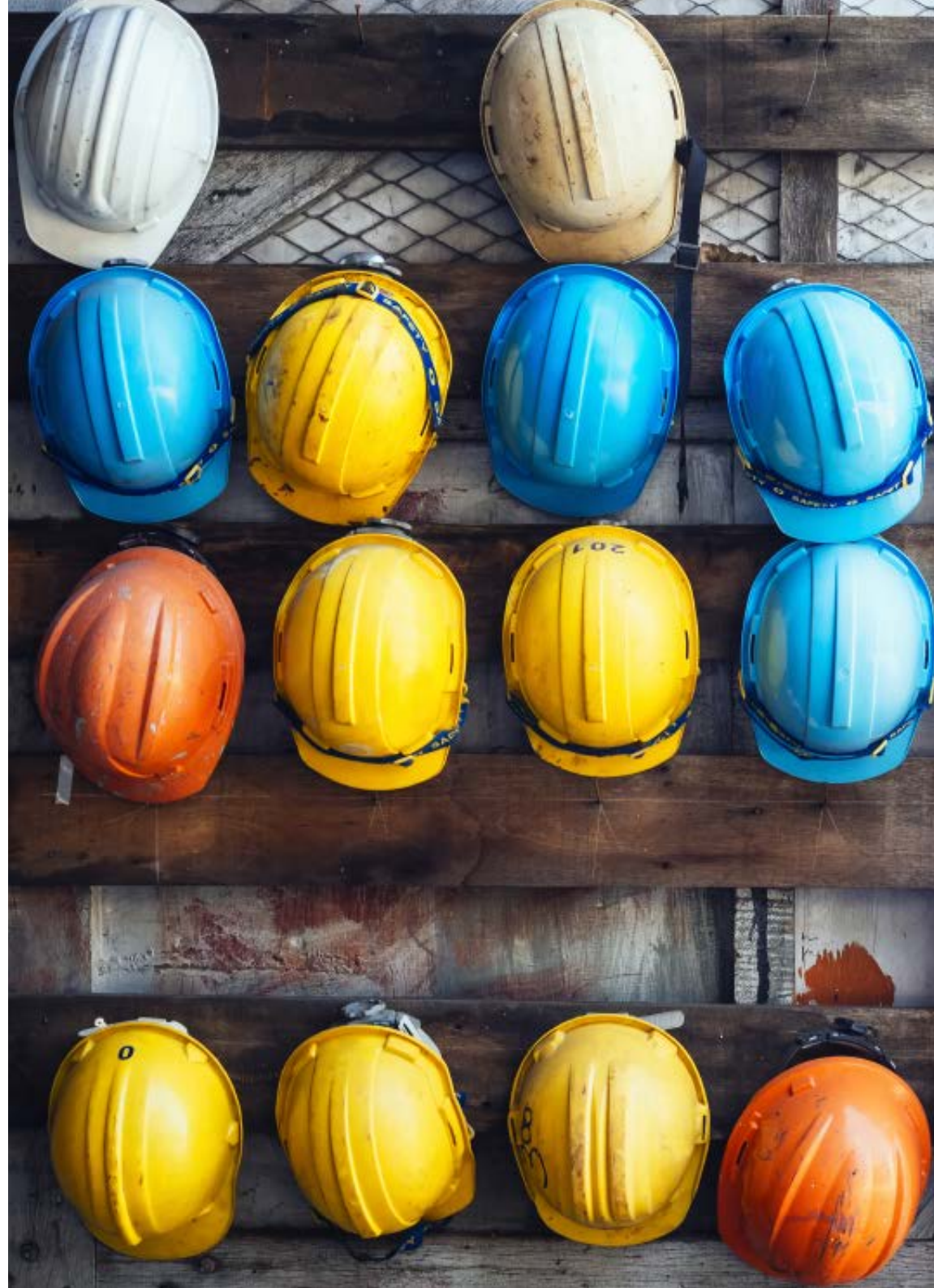
“Leaders set the culture. Culture determines behaviour. Safe behaviour gets people home at the end of the day.”

## 4. MAKE SURE YOUR LEADERS STAY ON MESSAGE

From there, Fox says it was important the company made sure its leaders were consistent with messaging and focus.

“Leaders set the culture. Culture determines behaviour. Safe behaviour gets people home at the end of the day,” he explains.

“It’s all about consistent execution year-in and year-out: consistency of the messaging, consistency of the program reinforcing previous year learnings.” Fox says. “And I think through that process, over time, you start building a level of trust in the organisation. People see that, “OK, they’re serious about this. This is not the program de jour that we’ve seen in the past.”





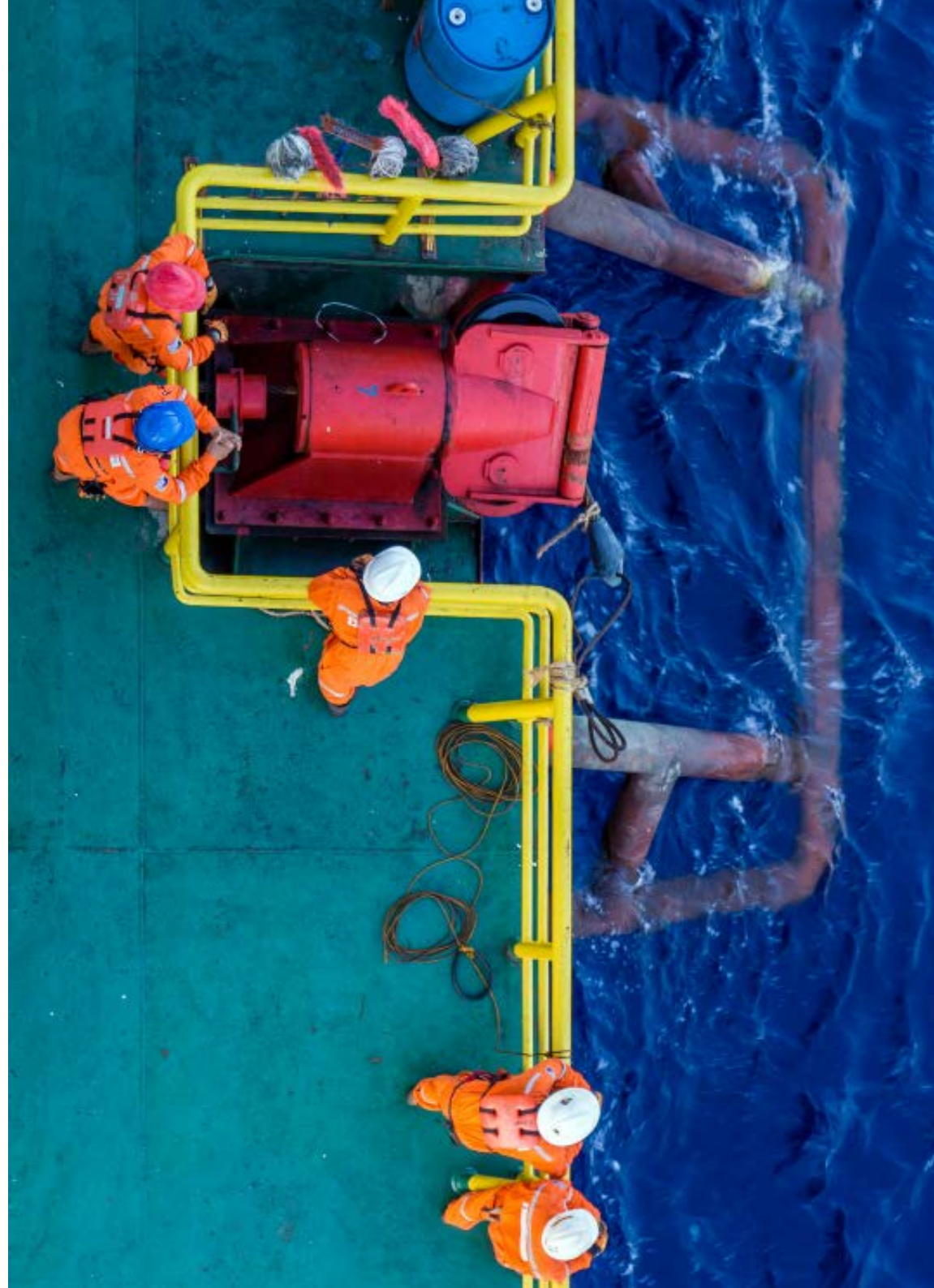
“We should have involved [them] from the craft, from the union, earlier in that process.”

## 5. INVOLVE YOUR INFORMAL SAFETY LEADERS

If there's one thing Fox wishes he had done differently it is inviting the company's informal safety leaders into this cultural change initiative.

“We should have involved our craft leaders earlier in that process. We would have accelerated I think the change had we done that.”

Fox says they would have become brand ambassadors for change earlier. “Hindsight's always 20/20 but bringing the craft employees – especially the informal safety leaders – in sooner would have been helpful.”





“A culture of commitment is best described as people taking accountability for their own safety but also looking out for their co-workers.”

## 6. ENCOURAGE PEOPLE TO TAKE CARE OF THEIR CO-WORKERS

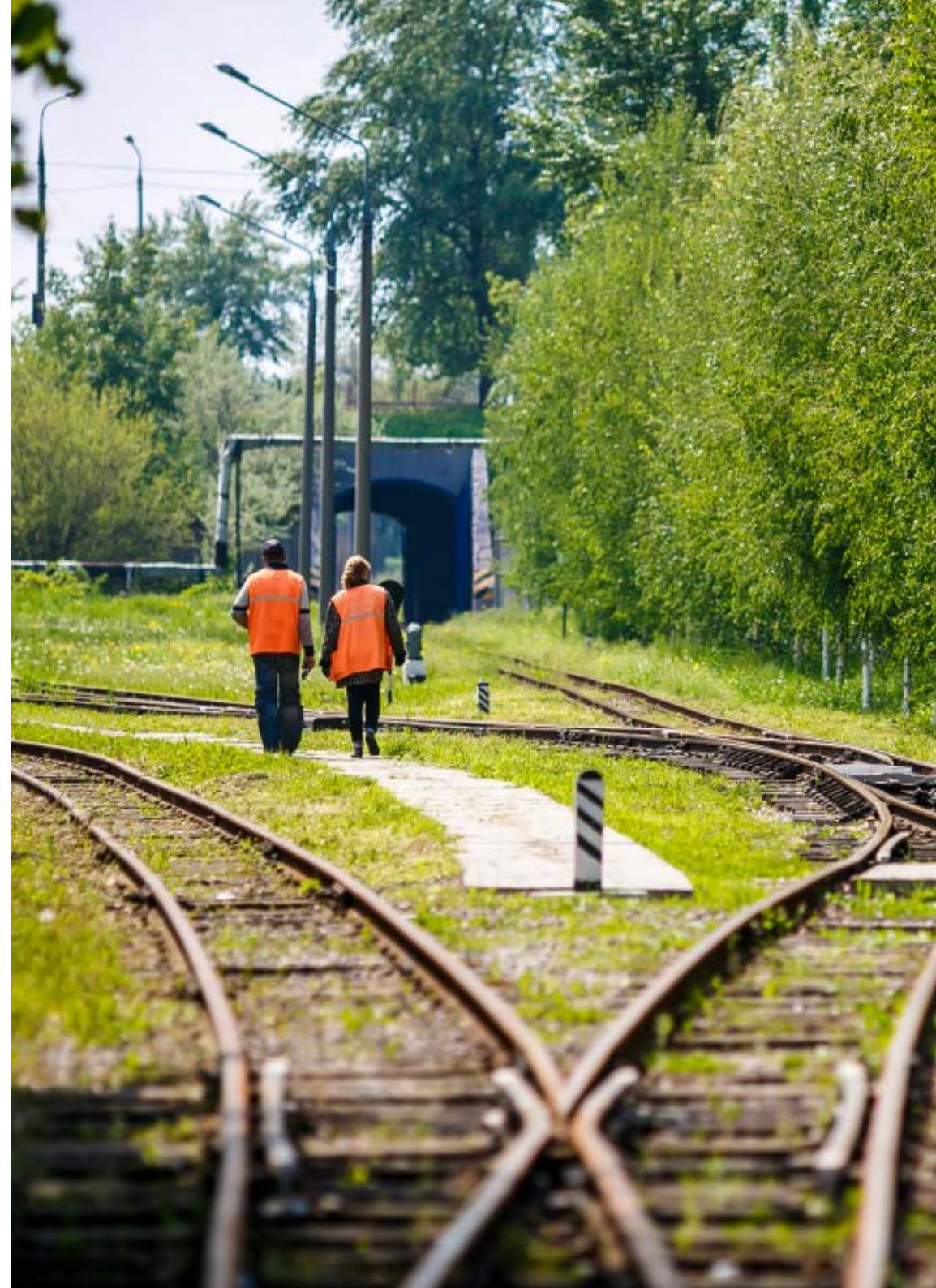
Fox says the final step to changing the safety culture at BNSF was promoting the idea that safety compliance had to turn into a safety commitment.

“A culture of commitment is best described as people taking accountability for their own safety but also looking out for their co-workers, being able to approach others – being willing to approach others – when they see their co-workers putting themselves at risk,” he explains.

The end result of all this effort, Fox says, was safety at BNSF changing from a “push” type of situation to a “pull” where the employees and labor unions became the driving force for safety improvements.

“As we made that shift employee engagement increased,” Fox says. “We put in place a program called “APPROACHING OTHERS” which was, you know, a very simple concept:

If you care about somebody, you’d be willing to approach them when you see them putting themselves at risk. If you care about somebody you’ll also hopefully recognise safe behaviour so it’s reinforced in the future.”





## A look at BNSF's injury statistics over this time period shows the results of this change in safety culture:

BNSF's Reportable Injury Frequency Ratio. The Rail Industry 'Reportable Frequency Ratio' is based on FRA (Federal Railroad Administration ~ the Rail Industry safety regulator) reportability requirements. FRA Reportable criteria very similar to OSHA criteria. Ratio based on 'Reportable Injuries per 200,000 man-hours'.

### 10-Year Period of Our Safety Cultural Transformation:

#### FRA Reportable Frequency Ratio:

1.41  
(2006)

0,95  
(2015)

#### Total FRA Reportable Injuries:

612  
(2006)

441  
(2015)

### Approaching Others Started in 2013:

#### FRA Reportable Frequency Ratio:

1.11  
(2006)

0,95  
(2015)

#### Total FRA Reportable Injuries:

475  
(2006)

441  
(2015)



Fox says it's important to remember there's not "one-size-fits-all" to truly change a company's culture. He credits the in-depth assessments BNSF got from DEKRA in helping the company identify their specific path to alter things. And, he says, your safety culture can only change if your company's values change.

"Priorities can change over time but a value is something that is deeply held."

Fox explains. "It's lasting. It's enduring. Safety's now a value [at BNSF]. Nothing we do at the railroad is more important than the safety of our employees and people getting home to their families."



Greg Fox has 30+ years of experience in the railway industry. In September of 2016, he retired as the Executive Vice President of Operations for BNSF Railroad. Greg's team was responsible for the safety and engagement of all employees. They implemented a Safety Cultural Transformation Initiative that achieved the company's best-ever employee safety & a reduction in Reportable Employee Injuries of over 60%.



## DEKRA Organisational Reliability

DEKRA Organisational Reliability is a behavioural change consultancy. Working in collaboration with our clients, our approach is to influence the safety culture with the aim of 'making a difference for the better'. We deliver the skills, methods, and motivation to change leadership attitudes, behaviours and decision-making among employees. Measurable sustainable improvement of safety outcomes is our goal. We are a service unit of DEKRA SE, a global leader in safety since 1925 with over 39,000 employees in 50 countries.

For more information, visit [www.dekra-organisational-reliability.com](http://www.dekra-organisational-reliability.com)

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